NOAA Web Update May 18, 2010
DEEPWATER HORIZON Incident

Situation: Tuesday 18 May

Fishery Closures

NOAA extended the boundaries of the closed fishing area in the Gulf into the northern portion of the loop current as a precautionary measure to ensure seafood from the Gulf will remain safe for consumers. The closed area is now slightly less than 19 percent of the Gulf of Mexico federal waters.

Loop Current

- Dr. Jane Lubchenco, NOAA Administrator, spoke today at a press briefing on the subject of the Loop current. Dr. Lubchenco's remarks are summarized below:
- The Loop Current is an area of warm water that comes up from the Caribbean, flowing past the Yucatan Peninsula and into the Gulf of Mexico. From there, it generally curves east across the Gulf and then flows south parallel to the west coast of Florida. As it flows between Florida and Cuba it becomes the Florida Current which moves through the Florida Straits, where it finally joins the Gulf Stream to travel up the Atlantic Coast.
- Both the location of the Loop Current and location of the oil slick are dynamic. Both move around from day to day. The present location of the oil is identified daily through analysis of satellite imagery, observer overflights with helicopters and fixed wing aircraft, as well as advanced sensing technology on aircraft.
- Satellite imagery on May 17 indicates that the main bulk of the oil is dozens of miles away from the Loop Current, but that a tendril of light oil has been transported down close to the Loop Current. NOAA is conducting aerial observations today to determine with certainty whether oil has actually entered the Loop Current.
- NOAA conducts aerial observations every day to observe the plume from the air. These observations help develop NOAA's trajectory models. Additionally today, the NOAA P-3 research aircraft will be dropping sensors to get better observations of the location of the loop current.
- The proximity of the southeast tendril of oil to the Loop Current indicates that oil is increasingly likely to become entrained. When that occurs, oil could reach the Florida Straits in 8 to 10 days.
- Once entrained in the Loop Current, persistent onshore winds and/or the oil getting into an eddy on the edge of the Loop Current would be required to bring the oil onto the Florida shoreline.

- During this transit time, the natural processes of evaporation and dispersion would reduce the oil volume significantly. The remaining oil could be composed of long strips of emulsified oil and mostly as “tar balls”.

- The Loop Current is dynamic. At present, at the top end of the Loop Current there is a counter-clockwise eddy. Thus, some amount of any oil drawn into the Loop Current would likely remain in the eddy, heading to the northeast, and some would enter the main Loop Current, where it might eventually head to the Florida Strait.

- NOAA will continue to closely monitor this portion of the oil over the next days to weeks. I emphasize that the bulk of the oil remains well to the north of the Loop Current, near the well site and towards the west and northwest from there. Currently only the southern tip of the slick, consisting of sheens and potentially unobserved tar balls, is in the vicinity of the Loop Current.

- In response to the possibility oil entering the Loop Current, NOAA is acting with an abundance of caution and announcing an expansion of the fisheries closure area at 12 PM today. The revised closure will be effective at 6 PM this evening and is just over 45,000 square miles, or just about 19% of federal waters in the Gulf of Mexico. Details will be available on our homepage, noaa.gov.

- The expansion of the fishing closure is one part of a pro-active stance that NOAA is taking to ensure public and seafood safety. To ensure the safety of seafood harvested from the Gulf of Mexico, NOAA is working with the Food and Drug Administration to re-align its assets to implement a broad-scaled seafood sampling plan. The plan includes sampling seafood from inside and outside of the closure area, as well as dockside and market-based sampling. Also, NOAA is increasing its monitoring of the biological implications of oil and dispersants.

- State governors and international colleagues have been alerted of the closure area expansion and the joint NOAA/FDA seafood sampling plan.

- We have also created a virtual Incident Command Center in St. Petersburg, Fla., that is ready to engage quickly when needed.

- There is no indication yet whether the oil might impact another country. We will notify and consult other nations as appropriate. The United States and Mexico are currently sharing information under the MEXUS Plan, a bilateral agreement on pollution incidents in coastal waters.

- NOAA is engaging experts within and outside government to develop long-term oil movement forecasts. Predicting where the oil may go if the release continues allows for adequate response measures and resources to be placed in appropriate locations.

- From the onset, the federal response has been aggressive, strategic and science-based. This oil spill is unprecedented and dynamic. As situations change and we gain new information, we will continue to reevaluate our response strategies, actions, and planning.

- NOAA stands shoulder to shoulder with Gulf communities during these challenging times.

Response to date

- Total response vessels: 950
- Containment Boom deployed: more than 1.36 million feet
- Containment boom available: more than 350,000 feet
- Sorbent boom deployed: more than 480,000 feet
- Sorbent boom available: more than 800,000 feet
- Total boom deployed: more than 1.8 million feet (regular plus sorbent boom)
- Total boom available: more than 1.15 million feet (regular plus sorbent boom)
- Oily water recovered: more than 7.65 million gallon
- Dispersant used: more than 590,000 gallons
- Dispersant available: more than 300,000 gallons
- Overall personnel responding: more than 20,000
- 17 staging areas are in place and ready to protect sensitive shorelines.